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ABSTRACT

Civic education is the teaching of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to become a responsible and effective citizen of a representative and constitutional democracy. Although civic education has been part of the core curriculum of elementary and secondary schools since the founding of the United States, in recent years leaders in education, government, and the general public have expressed concerns about the quality and outcomes of civic education in U.S. schools. They have called emphatically for the renewal and reform of civic education in schools. This digest discusses (1) the current deficiencies of civic education in schools; (2) research-based recommendations for improving content and pedagogy of civic education; and (3) Internet resources on improving civic education in schools. (Contains a list of 12 references and ERIC resources.) (BT)

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Improving Civic Education in Schools

By John J. Patrick

Civic education is the teaching of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to become a responsible and effective citizen of a representative and constitutional democracy. Since the founding of the United States of America, civic education has been part of the core curriculum of elementary and secondary schools. In recent years, however, leaders in education, government, and the general public have expressed concerns about the quality and outcomes of civic education in American schools (Galston 2001, 218-220). They have called emphatically for renewal and reform of civic education in schools. This Digest discusses (1) the current deficiencies of civic education in schools, (2) research-based recommendations for improving content and pedagogy of civic education, and (3) Internet resources on improving civic education in schools.

Current Deficiencies. The outcomes of civic education in schools are unsatisfactory. Results of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics revealed gross deficiencies in the civic knowledge of students. Most students in grades 4, 8, and 12 failed to reach the proficient level of achievement, which, as specified in the NAEP framework, indicates competence in civics. Twenty-one percent of fourth grade students, 21% of eighth grade students, and 22% of twelfth grade students reached the proficient level. Another way to look at the overall findings is to consider the large proportion of students that failed to reach the assessment's basic level of achievement: 31% of fourth graders, 30% of eighth graders, and 35% of twelfth graders scored below the basic level (Lutkus and Others 1999).

The scant, superficial civic knowledge of young Americans is related to their generally low levels of political participation and civic engagement, deficiencies in democratic attitudes or dispositions, and underdeveloped democratic citizenship skills. Researchers have found strong relationships between knowledge of democratic principles, processes, and institutions and (1) propensity to vote or otherwise participate in political life, (2) orientation to political tolerance and political interest, and (3) competence in cognitive and participatory skills of democratic citizenship, such as the capacities to analyze public issues and to cooperate with others in a group project (Galston 2001, 223-226).

Improving the Content and Pedagogy of Civic Education. How can civic educators improve the teaching and learning of civic knowledge as a key to the development of civic skills and dispositions? What recommendations can be derived from the research literature?

1. Increase the exposure of students to content in civics by (a) including it in courses in U.S. history, world history, literature, and other subjects in the curriculum, (b) emphasizing civics in the social studies curriculum in the primary grades (K-3), and (c) requiring of all students a civics course in middle school and a government course in high school. The justification for a stronger curricular emphasis on civics is that students' achievement of civic knowledge is related to the number of courses taken, the breadth and depth of topics studied, and the amount of time spent on lessons and homework (Niemi and Junn 1998).

2. Systematically teach students to analyze public issues and to participate democratically in making public policy decisions in response to the issues. This kind of learning experience in civics and government courses is likely to develop among students the cognitive and participatory skills and dispositions necessary for citizenship in a democracy (Vontz, Metcalf, and Patrick 2000).

3. Create and maintain a classroom climate that is conducive to free and open exchange of opinions about public issues and other controversial topics. This kind of classroom practice is related to the development of such civic dispositions as tolerance, civility, propensity to participate, and political interest (Baldi and Others 2001; Hahn 1998; Torney-Purta and Others 2001).

4. Encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities involving civic engagement and political participation. There is a strong, positive relationship between democratic participatory experiences in school-based organizations and the development of the skills and dispositions of democratic citizenship (Baldi and Others 2001; Torney-Purta and Others 2001; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

5. Foster a democratic ethos in the school. There is a positive relationship between a democratic school climate and development of democratic civic disposition and behavior among students; less authoritarian climates are linked to more democratic political attitudes and behavior (Baldi and Others 2001; Torney-Purta and Others 2001).

6. Conjoin content and processes in the teaching and learning of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Civic dispositions and skills, both intellectual and participatory, are inseparable from a body of civic knowledge or content. In order to think critically and act effectively and responsibly in response to a public issue, learners must understand the terms of the issue, its origins, the alternative responses to it, and the likely consequences of these responses. This understanding is based upon the knowledge of learners. The application of this knowledge to explain, evaluate, and resolve a public issue depends upon the cognitive process skills of learners. Both academic content and process—civic knowledge, disposition, and skills— must be taught and learned in tandem to fulfill the mission of civic education, which is to develop individuals who can establish, maintain, and improve democratic governance and citizenship in their country and throughout the world (Niemi and Junn 1998; Vontz, Metcalf, and Patrick 2000).

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Internet Sources. The following World Wide Web sites include information on civic education in schools and its implications for the improvement of instruction and the achievement of students.

American Political Science Association: APSANET. The APSA site includes papers presenting research on civic education, scholarly essays on recommendations for the improvement of practice in civic education, and links to sources of data and papers pertaining to notable research projects such as the IEA Civic Education Study and the NAEP in civics: <http://www.apsanet.org/>.

Center for Civic Education (CCE). The CCE Web site contains papers on theory, research, and practice in civic education. There also are links to other useful sites, such as Civnet, which provides information on international civic education projects: <http://www.civiced.org/>.

Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE). The Center promotes research on the civic engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. CIRCLE funds research that has implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. The Center's Web site includes reports and papers on research in civic education: <http://www.civic youth.org/>.

National Alliance for Civic Education (NACE). Launched in 2000, NACE is an alliance of organizations committed to the advancement of civic knowledge and engagement. The NACE Web site includes reports on research and practice in civic education with many links to other sites on civic education: <http://www.puaf.umd.edu/NACE/>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

Baldi, Stephane, and Others. WHAT DEMOCRACY MEANS TO NINTH-GRADERS: U.S. RESULTS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL IEA CIVIC EDUCATION STUDY. Washington, DC: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, 2001. ED 454 152.

Galston, William A. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement and Civic Education." ANNUAL REVIEW OF POLITICAL SCIENCE 4 (2001): 217-234.

Hahn, Carole L. BECOMING POLITICAL: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION. Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 1998. ED 426 920.

Hahn, Carole L., and Judith Torney-Purta. "The IEA Civic Education Project: National and International Perspectives." SOCIAL EDUCATION 63 (Nov.-Dec. 1999): 425-431. EJ 607 342.

Hebert, Yvonne, and Michel Page. "Research Initiatives in Citizenship Education." EDUCATION CANADA 40 (Fall 2000): 24-26, 27. EJ 613 646.

Lutkus, Anthony, and Others. NAEP 1998 CIVICS REPORT CARD FOR THE NATION. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1999. ED 435 583.

Niemi, Richard G., and Jane Junn. CIVIC EDUCATION: WHAT MAKES STUDENTS LEARN. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. ED 431 658.

Obenchain, Kathryn M. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER EDUCATION. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA, April 13-18, 1998. ED 431 639.

Patrick, John J. and Sheilah Mann, Eds. "Introduction to Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy." EDUCATION FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY: SERVICE LEARNING AND OTHER PROMISING PRACTICES. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000. ED 447 065.

Torney-Purta, Judith, and Others. CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION IN TWENTY-EIGHT COUNTRIES: CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AND ENGAGEMENT AT AGE FOURTEEN. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001. ED 452 116.

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. VOICE AND EQUALITY: CIVIC VOLUNTARISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Vontz, Thomas S., Kim K. Metcalf, and John J. Patrick. *PROJECT CITIZEN* AND THE CIVIC DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENT STUDENTS IN INDIANA, LATVIA, AND LITHUANIA. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000. ED 447 047.

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